

JOURNEY
Through
DARKNESS



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JOURNEY
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The war in Korea calls attention once again to the problems of the disabled veteran. This is the story of one veteran who, with the aid of government and private organizations, has met and overcome his war-inflicted handicap.

It is also the story of a quarter of a million civilians who have courageously surmounted the same handicap.

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Steve Finley is a war veteran with a future. He runs a small clothing store, sits on the town council, reads a new book every week, and likes to bowl and ride.

In a country full of ambitious young veterans, these facts alone might not seem too remarkable. But there's one other thing about Steve. He has been blind since D-Day, 1944.

Steve was in the first wave of infantry that went ashore on Omaha Beach that gray June morning. As he led his platoon to cover under the nightmarish fire of German machine guns, a land mine exploded a few yards away. Two men in the platoon were killed outright; the splintering fragments cost Steve the loss of both eyes.

HOW IT FEELS

In the base hospital, when he first realized he would be blind, Steve wanted to give up. Of all things that could possibly happen in combat, this was the one he had dreaded most.

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How does it feel to be blind? Steve can answer that: "At first you feel completely helpless — as if you're living in a different world from everyone else, a world hemmed in and alone. You keep thinking, why did this have to happen to me? It takes a while before you begin to realize there are a lot of things you can still do, blind or not."

Steve still remembers the first meals in the hospital. Objects on his plate were identified by their position on the face of an imaginary clock in front of him. The meat in the lower right hand of the plate was located at 5 o'clock; potatoes, at 10 o'clock; salad, at 2 o'clock, and so on. To avoid an overdose of salt, he was taught to sift the powder through outstretched fingers.

At the Veterans Administration hospital, Steve learned how to get around. He began by holding someone's arm, but soon he found that the contact of shoulder to shoulder was enough to guide him. While being led to lunch by another veteran one day, Steve complained about his disability. After listening for a few minutes, his companion told him to stop feeling sorry for himself.

"That's easy for you to say," said Steve, "you're not blind."

"Sure I am," said his friend, and with that they walked straight to their table in the mess hall.

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"I guess that was the biggest thrill of my life" Steve says today. "When I realized that the fellow leading me so easily was also blind, I began to feel a little better about the whole thing. I knew that if he could do it, I could too."

HANDS THAT SEE

During the months that followed, Steve took several steps up the stairway to independence. From maps with raised diagrams, he carefully memorized the floor-plan of the hospital well enough to walk around alone, using his arm, extended in front of him and crooked at the elbow, as a bumper.

In order to find his way in strange places, Steve was taught the proper use of a cane. Indoors he holds the light aluminum rod diagonally in front of him to serve as a bumper. Outdoors he holds it with the point slightly forward, moving rhythmically from side to side in a small arc. Around his home town, where he knows every street and building, the cane is used chiefly to let others know he is blind.

Steve realized that the ability to read and write would be important in the small clothing store he and his wife ran in Minnesota. So naturally he wanted to learn braille.

It came slowly at first, the small raised dots feeling strange to his touch. Because braille is new and difficult

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for insensitive fingers, only about 25 per cent of the blind ever master it. Steve started by memorizing the alphabet, then picked up a few words and phrases, and finally learned the short cuts of braille contractions and syllables. In four months he was able to read whole books in braille and enjoy them.

Today, through braille, Steve can do a great number of things that once seemed beyond reach. Besides reading and writing, he plays gin rummy with braille playing cards and tells time with a braille wrist watch.

Because of the thickness of the braille page, a single novel usually fills three to six volumes. "Gone With the Wind" took twelve. For this reason Steve usually relies on a talking-book machine to enjoy his favorite pastime — reading detective stories. A form of record player, the talking-book machine is loaned to the blind for life by the government of the United States. Records for it are available, free of charge, through the 27 distributing libraries of the Library of Congress, where thousands of books on every imaginable subject have been recorded.

Steve does a certain amount of normal writing with the use of a grooved board underneath his writing paper. The board guides his words in a straight line and prevents straggling. For most correspondence, however, he uses a typewriter. Since he now types 60 words a minute, this is no drawback.

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THE STARRING ROLE

A large part of Steve's training has consisted of memory work, for memory plays a starring role in the twilight world of the blinded. In this respect, at least, Steve is fortunate. He can remember how trees, buildings, and people actually look. The child who is blind from birth must live in an imaginary world created solely by the inner eye of his mind.

At the hospital, and later in his home in Minnesota, Steve memorized every inch of floor, wall and hallway. There is nothing mysterious — no "sixth sense" — about the rapidity with which he moves around his store. It is just a matter of remembering where things are.

He distinguishes coins by feeling their size. Paper money presents a slight problem, but Steve has a system for separating different denominations. Five dollar bills are folded once; ten dollar bills, twice, and so on. Each denomination is placed in a different compartment of his wallet. As for his wardrobe, Steve can pick out any suit in the closet simply by feeling the material.

CLUES GALORE

Steve has concentrated on the process of "seeing" with ears, nose, and feet. He can estimate the size of a room quite well by listening to reflected noises. The slight

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difference in the sound of his footsteps on the floor enables him to detect the presence of hallways; he knows when he passes a door because of the faint draft blowing through it. Outdoors, a sudden sensation of coolness tells him he is under the shade of a tree.

Smells are highly useful means of identification. Steve does not need to be told when he is inside a restaurant, a bar, a drug store, a bakery or a barber shop. And in a sense, Steve's feet "see," too. Through practice he has become able to distinguish among wood, cement, flagstone, and gravel through the soles of his shoes.

Getting around in traffic is difficult, but here too, there are clues to aid the sightless. When he hears a car motor idling nearby, he knows the traffic light is with him; a click signals him that the color of the light has changed.

EVEN BASKETBALL

One thing that used to bother Steve was a fear that he would never again be able to take part in sports. But today he goes bowling once a week, fishes, swims all summer long, rides occasionally when accompanied by a friend, and even shoots basketball a few times a year. The bowling alley in his town has built a small metal guide rail which Steve uses to get his direction. After he has thrown the first ball, the scorekeeper tells him

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the number of the pins that remain standing. If the scorekeeper says "10," Steve aims his second shot down the right side of the alley. You'd be surprised at the number of strikes and spares on his scorecard.

Basketball shooting is more difficult. By having someone call to him from the basket, Steve can get his bearings to take a shot. For the blind, a special buzzer attachment identifies the position of the basket, and a bell rings whenever the ball goes through the hoop.

EXAMPLES OF THE IMPOSSIBLE

Steve enjoys almost every type of radio program and likes listening to the movies — especially if a musical is showing. It's easy to keep up with current topics, because the best of the new books are printed in braille and recorded for the talking-book machine. He and his wife go dancing, enjoy parties and picnics, and run their store together. And they are doing better today than they were before the war.

There are still many things that Steve cannot do, and he makes no bones about the fact that it is easier to get along *with* eyes than without. But he knows, too, that being blind today is not the handicap it was fifty years ago.

In Minnesota, a totally blind man is a riding instructor. His specialty: exhibitions of trick riding.

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In New York City a blind woman paints with water colors, using pins to establish her position on the canvas.

In Alabama an ex-football star, blinded in the war, shoots golf in the nineties.

In California a blind pianist, singer, and commentator conducts a radio program.

HELP FOR A QUARTER OF A MILLION

As a veteran, Steve has been aided chiefly by the Veterans Administration, whose program has returned thousands of blinded veterans to happy, useful lives. Without charge, veterans like Steve get typewriters, electronic recorders, braille apparatus, talking books, special watches and a variety of other equipment. With all this go the services of rehabilitation experts who are specialists in the problems of the blind.

For the civilian blinded, who greatly outnumber the veterans, the federal government makes generous grants to 48 state agencies to provide skilled training in a multitude of different jobs. There are also in the United States over 200 private local and nation-wide organizations which share in the inspiring work of rehabilitating the quarter of a million blind in this country.

The largest of these organizations give the sightless every possible assistance and instruction in both work and play. Vocational training and aptitude tests. A nur-

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sery school for children. Instruction in braille, typing, dressmaking, manual skills. A full-fledged music school. A swimming pool and bowling alleys. Choral singing, dances, bingo and card games. Dramatic groups. Pottery and sewing classes. Oral readers for blind students. A transcribing service for recording books in braille.

Such organizations also help place the blind in a variety of different jobs. In many cases loans are made to enable an individual to start his own business. Besides helping the blind readjust to their new environment, stress is placed on the instruction of family and friends, for few people with 20-20 vision can really understand the problems of the sightless.

SOME ADVICE FOR THE SEEING

"Whatever you do," Steve says, "don't treat the blind with an overdose of pity. That's one thing that is tough to take. Generally a fellow like myself can get around all right. So don't *insist* on helping — it hurts a man's pride to have people think he's helpless. And don't grab a blind man by the arm or shout at him. When you can't see what's going on, it's a terrible surprise. Let *him* take your arm; speak to him in a conversational tone. Two other *don'ts*: don't leave doors ajar and don't move furniture without telling him. Remember, he has no way of knowing.

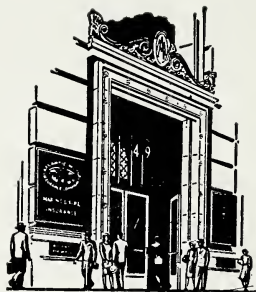
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"I don't like being blind, of course. But in a way I'm kind of lucky. There were many fellows I knew who never came back at all. Now, I suppose, there will be many more. And there are a lot of things that remain the same whether you have eyes or not. The smell of lilacs in spring doesn't change — except maybe it gets more intense. A drink of cold water still tastes wonderful after you've been working all day in the warm sun. My wife's voice sounds just as good as it always did. And the funny thing is that people are much nicer to you.

"The future? I think mine is pretty good."

We wish to express our sincere thanks to Dr. Philip S. Platt, executive director of the Lighthouse in New York City, and to the Information Service of the Veterans Administration for their assistance in supplying much of the source material for this booklet.

Although our story of Steve Finley is based on actual case histories, fictitious names and places have been used throughout.



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